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Students and Alcohol: Implementing Programs that Empower Students to Make Responsible Choices

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According to the 2003 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA), 56.9% of college-enrolled students reported drinking in the past month and 38.6% reportedly binge during those same periods. (SAMHSA 2003). According to the Spring 2002 National College Health Assessment, over a 30-day period 70.5% of surveyed college students reportedly used alcohol. The idea that alcohol can be eradicated from college campuses is futile. Regardless of which number more accurately reflects your campus, student behaviors involving alcohol always seem to be a major concern.

Over the past two decades, many colleges and universities, as well as subsequent court cases, have relied heavily on the *Bradshaw v. Rawlings* decision stating that “rights formerly possessed by college administrations have been transferred to students.” The *Bradshaw* decision effectively dissolved the opinion of higher education institutions being *in loco parentis*. The dissolution of *in loco parentis* yielded what Robert D. Bickel calls the “bystander university;” an institution with minimal duties owed to its students and one that is helpless to student life and harm. (Bickel 1999). Colleges and universities have long recognized the risks of

student behaviors involving alcohol, yet many have felt no legal obligation to act. The days of the institution as a bystander are concluding. We are embarking on a new era of duty; an era defined greatly by the special relationship institutions of higher education have with their students. In addition to our legal duties, as student developers, we have ethical and moral obligations to students. We need to develop the whole student within the campus and greater communities. We must empower students to make responsible decisions, especially when facing risky situations.

LEGAL AND ETHICAL DUTIES

Colleges often fulfill their legal duty by having alcohol policies that are clearly written, communicated, and enforced in compliance with local and national laws. Every state possesses a minimum drinking age of 21 years and many local ordinances prohibit the use of alcohol in public areas. The blood alcohol content (BAC) permitted to operate a motorized vehicle varies from state to state. For example, Texas, like most states, allows a BAC level of 0.08, and a zero tolerance policy for anyone under the age of 21. We must enforce and communicate the policies and laws clearly. However, simply enforcing policies and laws is not enough. We also possess an ethical duty to do more.

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PROGRAMS THAT EMPOWER STUDENTS

Some common risks associated with student behaviors involving alcohol are underage drinking, disturbance of the peace, property damage, sexual assault, physical assault, driving while intoxicated, alcohol poisoning, reduction in the quality of life, and loss of life. While much of the behavior associated with these risks is not directly under the control of a higher education institution, such behaviors are within our influence. We need to warn students of potential risks they will encounter while in college. We must speak candidly about the foreseeable risks of behaviors associated with alcohol. As part of our mission, we possess an ethical duty to empower our students as citizens to make sensible and rational decisions, especially those concerning risky behaviors.

In 2001, traditional-aged college students who drove under the influence ranged from 16% to 27% depending on age, with drivers being 21 years of age or older hovering around 25%. (SAMHSA 2003). Programs should encourage students to walk to events, or identify and utilize designated drivers, public transportation, and chartered transportation to prevent the dangers associated with intoxicated drivers.

Programs also should encourage students to look out for one another, monitoring each others' behaviors. One fourth of college students reported academic problems related to alcohol use. (SAMHSA 2003). A strong network of peers can confront behaviors associated with alcohol use. Programs should empower our students to stand up to their peers and confront destructive behaviors to prevent sexual and physical assaults, drunk driving, and excessive consumption. Peers can expedite emergency responses and mediate disruptive behaviors.

Programs to address student behaviors involving alcohol are being implemented at institutions across the nation. Though programs may derive from small residential liberal arts institutions, like Austin College's Safe Party Workshop, or large research institutions, like Ohio State University's Party Smart campaign, the ultimate goal is to develop students into responsible citizens and reduce risks.

Austin College's Safe Party Workshop is a two-hour

session presented by the Assistant Director of Student Life, Director of Student Wellness, and a campus police officer. Organizations desiring to host events with alcohol are required to have their president and social chair present. Topics covered include:

- College policies
- The reservation and approval process
- Social norms concerning campus and national behaviors
- Federal, state, and local laws
- Safe rates of consumption; and
- Fulfilling responsibilities

Ohio State's Student Wellness Center Party Safe program disseminates similar information targeted to first-year students. In addition to disseminating information, the Center provides a Safe Party Kit at no charge that includes:

- A Party Smart Planning Guide
- Brochures on alcohol, other drugs, sexually transmitted diseases, and violence
- A Party Smart t-shirt
- A certificate for 24 cans of Coca Cola beverages
- 2 safer sex kits; and
- Other items as they are available

Though the programs may differ in approach, the purpose is the same. Each encourages students to develop a strong network of peers who behave responsibly. Each encourages students to host functions involving alcohol responsibly. Students are informed of their responsibilities and liabilities as social hosts. Hosts may be held liable for their guests' behavior resulting from their participation in the event. Students are encouraged to be responsible and provide alternatives to alcohol. Both programs advise student hosts to:

- Check identification at entrances
 - Identify and mark all guests with wrist bands, and/or permanent inks to help easily distinguish guests who are both of age and under age.
- Allow only students over 21 years of age to consume alcohol.
- Place beverages in approved containers, such as plastic cups limited to 12 ounces.
- Minimize the guest list.
 - A list enables guests to be easily identified, contained within a certain area, and reduces the chances of property damage.

POLICY & BEST PRACTICES: STUDENT LIFE

-A limited guest list helps keep noise levels appropriate and other interferences reasonable, such as accumulated trash levels, parking nuisances, and excessive foot traffic.

- Stay sober and refrain from consuming alcohol.
 - It is important that students be prepared to recognize and confront behaviors of their guests as they arise. An individual that is under the influence is less likely to notice any changes in guests' behaviors.
 - A sober host is better equipped to deal with local authorities and manage the event effectively.
- Provide other forms of entertainment that remove the emphasis from alcohol: music, non-drinking games, themes, and other entertainment.

As professionals, we should model programs that engage students to develop strategies enabling them to look out for their peers, to be responsible hosts and to conduct events with purposes beyond alcohol. We need to make student hosts aware of their liabilities and responsibilities. Our special relationship is contingent upon students making successful decisions. Student success is dependent on how well we provide them with resources that empower them to make responsible choices.

CONCLUSION

We, as student developers, can no longer sit back idly. It is unlikely that courts will return higher education institutions to the *in loco parentis* era, or that courts will diminish

student rights or their status as emancipated adults. As the bystander era is concluding, it is important that we acknowledge our special relationship with students. Our special relationship expands the duties beyond merely communicating the policies, laws and local ordinances; it obligates us to fulfill our mission to empower students to become responsible citizens. The courts will most likely challenge institutions to fulfill their mission. We cannot fulfill our mission by simply communicating clearly the institutional policies, the laws, the local ordinances and social norms of campus to students. To fulfill our mission we must develop programs that empower students to be responsible citizens and make responsible decisions concerning alcohol use.

REFERENCES

American College Health Association. (2002). *National College Health Assessment: Reference Group Executive Summary Spring 2002*. Baltimore: ACHA

Bickel, Robert D. & Lake, Peter F. (1999). *The Rights and Responsibilities of the Modern University: Who Assumes the Risks of College Life?*, Durham: Carolina Academic Press

Bradshaw v. Rawlings, 612 F.2d 135 (3rd Cir. 1979)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration. (2003) *The NHSDA Report, "Alcohol Use by Persons Under the Legal Drinking Age of 21. May 9, 2003.*

RESOURCE MATERIALS

National College Health Assessment Page

http://www.acha.org/projects_programs/assessment.cfm

Ohio State University Party Smart

<http://partysmart.osu.edu/>

Bradshaw v. Rawlings, 612 F.2d 135 (3rd Cir. 1979) Link via Franklin Pierce Law Center

<http://www.faculty.fplc.edu/redfield/library/case-bradshaw.rawlings.htm>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration. (2003) *The NHSDA Report, "Alcohol Use by Persons Under the Legal Drinking Age of 21. May 9, 2003.*

<http://www.samhsa.gov>